

Integration of gender practices and promotion of diversity in customs and trade: the case of East and Southern Africa

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Abstract

The East and Southern Africa (ESA) region continues to lag in gender equality, with women remaining largely underrepresented in leadership and high-status positions compared to their sisters in other world regions. This is even though the three Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in ESA have all made efforts at incorporating gender perspectives in their customs and trade policies. This article explores the gender gap in customs and trade across ESA and concludes that the region's member countries stand to benefit from improved organisational performance and increased global competitiveness by integrating gender perspectives in their customs and trade operations.

1. Introduction

Gender equality dimensions remain poor in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in general, and East and Southern Africa (ESA) in particular, despite women's empowerment being acknowledged in international trade discourse as being crucial to stimulating sustainable development and growth. According to the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Report (UNDP, 2019a), SSA recorded higher levels of gender inequality compared to other more developed regions like Europe and Central Asia. This partly seems to suggest that the lack of sustained empowerment of women and girls impedes a country's development. Moreover, current trade debates on the multilateral trading system are taking place at a time when there is a reconceptualisation of development itself. The new trend points towards moving away from measuring development using market criteria such as consumption and income, to measuring development based on human wellbeing, especially of the marginalised in society such as women (Cagatay, 1998).

The critical role that gender dimensions play in international trade and economic development has been recognised both at the international and the continental level. Perhaps the most influential international policy on gender equality is the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations [UN], 1995), which recognises the persistent inequalities between women and men as an obstacle to the wellbeing of all people globally and introduces a series of measures designed to enhance the advancement and empowerment of all women. In 2015 the United Nations also highlighted gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as one of its key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for achieving global peace and prosperity by 2030 (UN, 2015, p. 14). Matters of gender inequality have also featured in multilateral trade negotiations with the World Trade Organization (WTO) members endorsing the Buenos Aires Declaration on Women and Trade at the Eleventh WTO Ministerial Conference in 2017 (World Trade Organization [WTO], 2017). The declaration calls for

the inclusion of women in trade by acknowledging that inclusive trade policies have the capacity to advance gender equality and women's economic empowerment, which would ultimately have a positive impact on economic growth and poverty reduction.

Despite SSA registering some of the highest levels of gender inequality (UNDP, 2019a, p. 149), some of the continent's major regional and continental agreements contain gender-related provisions. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Revised Treaty, first signed in 1993, has dedicated Article 63 to Women and Development and encourages the member states to establish appropriate policies and measures to enhance the economic conditions of women (Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS], 1993). Chapter 24 of the 1993 treaty establishing the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) also encapsulates member states' commitment to implementing appropriate laws and measures aimed at promoting the role of women in development and business (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa [COMESA], 1993). Similar provisions have been articulated in the 1999 Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community (EAC) in chapter 22 on "enhancing the role of women in socio-economic development" (EAC, 1999). More recently, Article 3(e) of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has highlighted the promotion and attainment of "sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development, gender equality and structural transformation of the State Parties" as one of its general objectives (Africa Union, 2018, p. 4). Article 5 of The Treaty of the Southern African Development Community (Southern African Development Community (SADC) Treaty) highlights gender mainstreaming in the process of community building as part of SADC's key objectives (Southern African Development Community [SADC], 1992, p. 6). It further assigns the SADC Secretariat responsibilities for gender mainstreaming all SADC programs and activities (SADC, 1992, p. 14).

Apart from the multilateral and regional commitments, there have also been initiatives that have specifically targeted gender integration and inclusion in customs and trade. The United Nations Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has developed the Trade and Gender Toolbox, which provides a systematic framework and methodology to support countries in their assessment of the impact of their trade reforms on women. The toolbox applies four components: an overview of the gender inequalities in the country's economic context, a quantitative analysis of the anticipated consequences of the trade reform on women's participation and the economy, an outline of the accompanying gender-sensitive measures and monitoring indicators and a trade and gender index to synthesise the evolution of trade openness on gender inequalities in a single indicator (The United Nations Conference for Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2017b, p. 1).

The World Customs Organization (WCO) has also developed various initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity, equality and diversity in its capacity building agenda. One of the most notable initiatives that covers trade facilitation issues has been the WCO's Gender Equality Organizational Assessment Tool (GEOAT) introduced in 2013 (World Customs Organization [WCO], 2013). The GEOAT is designed to enable customs administrations to assess their policies, practices and processes to address gender equality issues. This is geared towards promoting the implementation of gender-responsive customs reforms and modernisation initiatives. As listed on its website, in 2018 the WCO, under the framework of the Finland East and Southern Africa Programme II, introduced a blended training package on how to advance gender equality in customs administration. The training package was aimed at sensitising customs officials on gender equality and its link with customs reforms and modernisation. The pilot workshop where the training package was introduced included participants from Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Mauritius, Malawi, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe (WCO, 2018).

Despite these gender mainstreaming efforts, gender inequality still poses a threat to customs and trade performance particularly within the ESA region (Mwondha et al., 2018, p. 6–7). Though the benefits of promoting women’s participation in international trade have been noted in previous studies (Brenton et al., 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019), very little work has focused on Customs in the ESA region. This article seeks to identify the gender equality challenges facing customs and trade in the ESA region and explore some of the benefits that the member states customs and trade authorities stand to gain from enforcing gender equality measures.

To achieve these aims, the article will firstly explore the related concepts of gender equality and gender equity as well as the global approaches to gender inequality and development outcomes. Next, the gender dimensions across the ESA region will be reviewed. This discussion will initially highlight some of the gender mainstreaming efforts made across the region and subsequently assess their impact by analysing the gender equality levels as presented by various indices of inequality. The following section will then examine how gender inequality has manifested in Customs across the ESA member countries. Finally, prior to concluding remarks, the article will discuss some of the key benefits that the ESA member countries stand to gain from enforcing gender equality measures in their relevant customs authorities and trade policies.

2. Gender equality, gender equity and global approaches to gender and development

The words gender and sex are often conflated but have different meanings. Similarly, the term gender equality and gender equity are sometimes used interchangeably but represent two distinct concepts. The term gender has been distinguished from sex which points to biological differences between women and men. Gender refers to how persons are perceived and expected to act and think. These gender roles are premised on social construction as opposed to the biological differences that manifest through being either the male or female sex (Nicholson, 1994, p.79). At birth boys and girls are distinguished based on their sex, but as they grow up society accords them different roles, attributes, opportunities, privileges and rights that in the end create the social differences between women and men (World Health Organization [WHO], 2002). Thus, gender roles are dynamic and vary widely among societies and cultures. The “set of activities available to be performed in accordance with cultural gender expectations” are defined as gender practices (Martin, 2003, p. 354). Gender practices may also be demonstrated in the way people talk or position themselves relative to others and this is what defines the gender order in each society.

Gender equity refers to “fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs” (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2000, p. 48). It usually requires differential treatment of women and men (or specific measures) to compensate for the social and historical disadvantages that prevent women and men from sharing a level playing field. Gender equality, on the other hand, refers to the absence of discrimination between women and men in terms of access to opportunities, services and allocation of resources (ILO, 2000, p.48). This refers to fairness and justice in the enjoyment of rights, responsibilities and opportunities between women and men. Vyas-Doorgapersad (2017, p. 169) defines gender equality as referring to women and men being equal and sharing the same rights.

The equitable representation of persons of different genders, usually in the workplace, is defined as gender diversity. Equity leads to equality. Achieving gender equity would typically entail taking differential actions to address historical inequality among women and men to achieve gender equality. Some of those differential actions may involve promoting gender diversity in sectors that had historically been male dominated.

Gender equality, equity and diversity have long been identified as fundamental ingredients for the achievement of sustainable development and growth. Nevertheless, the economic inequalities facing women and men in SSA have been a major contributor to the region's low level of human development (UNDP, 2016, p. 54). The importance of integrating gender practices into development dates to the 1960s. Studies by Boserup (1970) had noted that the early colonial and postcolonial development policies across many developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America had been biased against women. She noted that with the spread of capitalism in such regions men were being migrated for wage labour or were engaged in the highly productive export-oriented farming sector, while women were left behind as subsistence producers in the low yielding agricultural sector characterised by the use of primitive techniques. Initial attempts at increasing women's participation in development led to the Women in Development (WID) regime in the 1970s that pushed for integration of women into the international development strategy. This led to development organisations establishing institutions that supported women as well as implementing development assistance policies and programs that included women. However, one of the major criticisms of the WID approach was based on its failure to recognise the source of women's oppression in the economic system. Critics of the approach noted that it focused on integrating women into the existing social structures and failed to take note of the fact that those structures were inherently exploitative of women and had already granted women unequal terms through allocating them positions in subsistence labour (Vijayamohan et al., 2009, p. 11).

Criticisms of the WID regime gave birth to the Women and Development (WAD) movement in the late 1970s. The WAD perspective recognised the inequalities ingrained within the existing global structures and pushed for reform to more equitable international structures as a solution to promoting women in development. Proponents of the regime viewed the global inequalities existing between countries as well as class inequalities based on wealth distribution as being part of the reason why women were not benefiting from the current structures (Muyoyeta, 2004, p. 7). WAD further recognised that women from third world countries who did not have elite status were more "adversely affected by the structure of inequalities within the international system" (Rathgeber, 1990, p. 493). The WAD approach proposed the removal of the patriarchal hegemony through designing intervention strategies that created women-only development projects. It further pushed for improvement to the international structures by making them more equitable through resolving the underrepresentation of women in economic, political and social structures. Nevertheless, the WAD regime has been criticised for failing to consider that the pre-existing marginalised status of women and their lack of relevant skills would likely act as a barrier to the success of the women-only development projects. It was further argued that the WAD intervention strategies focused on income-generating activities without accounting for the reproductive side of women's lives and work. This was centred on western countries' assumptions that placed no economic value on household activities that were mostly performed by women in the global south, such as family maintenance, childbearing and rearing, or care of the elderly (Rathgeber, 1990, p. 493). They simply classed all women into one group and failed to account for the differences existing between women in terms of race and ethnicity. Another weakness of the WAD approach was its presumption that the position of women would improve once international structures were made more equitable, but it failed to address the inequalities stemming from the social relations of gender and how to shift such gender perceptions.

By the 1980s reflections on women's development experience, particularly the growing poverty of women and men in developing countries, led to a shift in approach to addressing the development problems. This gave rise to the Gender and Development (GAD) approach, which placed emphasis on gender rather than women. GAD focuses on how gender relations between women and men are socially constructed, often to the detriment of women. It looks at how society has assigned specific roles, responsibilities and expectations to men and women, which have shaped the division of

labour and control over resources, often subordinating women. Rather than integrating women into development projects, GAD focuses on redistributing powers in social relations (Vijayamohan et al. 2009, p. 14). It tries to address “male cultural, social and economic privileges, so that women are able to make equal social and economic profit out of the same resources” (Goetz, 1997, p. 3). It recognises that gender divisions of labour operate differently in different societies and cultures, advocating for social transformation of gender role expectations in development policies. So, for instance, in planning for development, the provision for childcare may not be a priority for men but would be crucial in ensuring that women participate in the development opportunities (Muyoyeta, 2004, p. 8). GAD places emphasis on the participation of states in “promoting women’s emancipation” by providing some of the social services which were typically assigned to women by society (Rathgeber, 1990, p. 494). Owing to its focus on reconstituting social structures and institutions, GAD perspectives are less often found in projects and activities of international development agencies.

The current practical approach to promoting gender equality in developing countries is the push to view the reduction of gender inequality as being part of smart economics. This view was advocated by the World Bank (2012) and holds gender equality as an instrument for development. It stresses that bridging the gap between women and men in human capital and economic opportunities is smart economics and vital to enhancing productivity and improving other development outcomes. This approach seems to draw on the WID in promoting investment in women to achieve effective development outcomes. It points to three ways in which gender equality matters for development. First, by eliminating barriers that limit women from having the same access as men to education, productive inputs and economic opportunities would generate broader productivity gains. Second, improving women’s status would lead to more investment in their children’s human capital and have a positive impact on other outcomes for their children. Third, improving women’s chances of being as politically and socially active as men would result in more representative and inclusive institutions and policies, thereby promoting better development outcomes (World Bank, 2012, p. 3). This article acknowledges the smart economics approach to gender and development.

3. Gender dimensions across the ESA region

In assessing the gender dimensions across the ESA region, it is important to first identify the efforts made towards closing the gender gap to make regional trade more inclusive. This will be followed by an assessment of the gender equality levels across the region, which will attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the gender mainstreaming efforts.

3.1 Gender mainstreaming efforts in trade policies across ESA

To address gender inequality, the three RECs within ESA have developed various strategies to mainstream gender practices in trade to foster economic development. COMESA Heads of State and Government adopted the COMESA Gender Policy (CGP) in 2002. The Gender and Social Affairs Division of the COMESA Secretariat was given a mandate to implement the CGP. The CGP provides a comprehensive GAD Strategy aimed at addressing gender inequalities and facilitating the engendering of member states’ legislations and development policies (UNCTAD, 2017a, p. 4). As part of its gender equality efforts, the COMESA Secretariat has been implementing its five-year Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Action Plan since 2009. Part of COMESA’s key gender equality achievements include the development of the Gender Mainstreaming manuals, which serve as guidelines to policy makers to apply gender equality principles to several vital sectors which include trade, infrastructure development, investment promotion and private sector development, as well as information and communication. The guidelines for mainstreaming gender in the trade sector provide for several measures aimed at assessing the gender redistribution effects of trade.

They include:

- developing data and information systems for recording and generating detailed quantitative and qualitative information disaggregated by sex
- undertaking gender analysis on how women and men are impacted differently by trade practices and processes
- formulating gender policy for the trade sector
- taking actions to bolster women's capacities and competitiveness in the trade sector both at the national and regional levels
- facilitating and strengthening women's representation and participation in decision-making processes
- designating a gender focal person at a senior level to oversee gender dimensions of the trade sector
- allocating gender mainstreaming funds
- developing clear targets as well as indicators to monitor and evaluate the attainment of the objectives (The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa [COMESA], 2010, pp. 9–12).

Aside from the gender provisions contained in the EAC Treaty, the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) passed the 2016 EAC Gender Equality and Development Bill which consolidates into one document all the legal provisions and policy frameworks on gender equality that member states are party to at the regional, continental and international level (EAC, 2016). It aims to ensure that the rights of women and men are uniformly promoted and realised across the region (UNCTAD, 2018, p. 35). Clause 14 of the Bill makes provision for promoting women's participation in regional trade and economic development. As part of engendering trade, member states are required to:

- support national and regional associations of women in business
- address gender and nontariff barriers
- scale up efforts to address gender constraints such as access to technology, market information and credit or financial services
- facilitate women's and girls' entry into trade by providing them with training on information and communications technology (ICT) and e-commerce
- ensure gender analysis in trade impact assessments
- promote women's participation in trade negotiations as well as engendering trade policies
- establish women's trade and enterprise development frameworks.

The region has also implemented the 2018 EAC Gender Policy, which aims to strengthen gender mainstreaming in the planning and budgetary processes of EAC organs, institutions and member states (EAC, 2018). The policy also prioritises the promotion of gender equality in trade and economic empowerment. On this matter, it commits member states to increase access and control of productive resources and economic benefits by men and women, and boys and girls, in both informal and formal sectors.

The SADC Secretariat established a Gender Unit in 1998 to monitor and implement SADC gender commitments at national and regional levels. The Gender Unit was able to develop a Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit as well as a Gender Workplace Policy, which were adopted by the ministers responsible for Gender and Women's Affairs in the member states. The Toolkit serves as a generic guideline for mainstreaming gender in various activities including trade, industry, investment and social human development (Shayo, 2012, p. 18). SADC further passed the SADC Protocol on GAD in 2008, which entered into force in 2013 (SADC, 2008). The Protocol aims to provide for the empowerment of women and achieve gender equality and equity through development by encouraging the harmonisation and implementation of gender-responsive legislation, policies and projects. The Protocol was later amended and the 2016 Revised Protocol entered into force in 2018 (SADC, 2016).

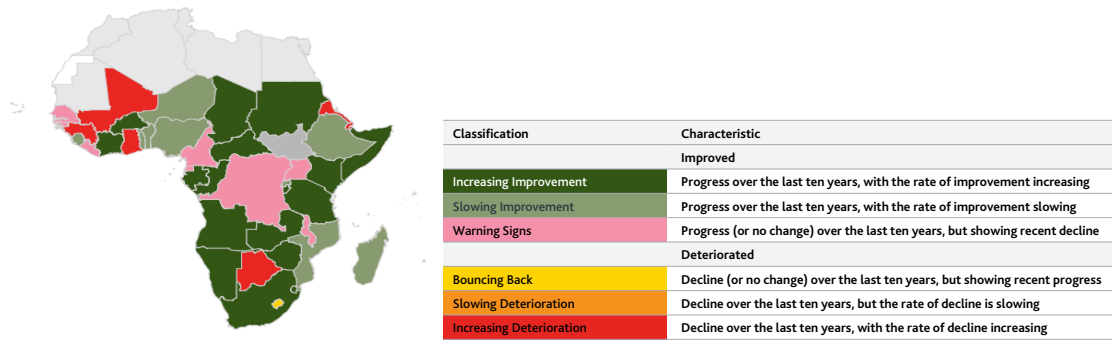
3.2 Gender equality levels across the ESA region

Despite ESA regional bodies developing broad gender mainstreaming blueprints, there has been a lack of clear and consistent implementation of the various policies and strategies. There remains a large employment difference between men and women across Africa, with women being largely assigned to unpaid and vulnerable activities. For instance, over 60 per cent of the female workforce in SSA is employed in the agricultural sector (ILO, 2016, p. 23). A large portion of women in SSA still work in informal work arrangements with around 34.9 per cent engaged as contributing family workers, which exceeds that of men which stands at 17.9 per cent (ILO, 2016, p. 10).

In addition, informal cross-border trade (ICBT) forms a significant part of the continent's trade and provides a source of income for approximately 43 per cent of Africa's total population (Afrika & Ajumbo, 2012, p. 1). Women account for a large percentage of ICBT representing around 60 per cent of informal traders in west and central Africa and 70 per cent in the SADC (Koroma et al., 2017, p. 1). Yet women face more challenges when engaging in ICBT than their male counterparts. A recent survey conducted by UNCTAD found that female informal traders in Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia still encountered problems including limited capacity to trade in higher value-added goods, limited capacity to diversify the goods they trade, limited access to financial resources, harassment and personal safety risks, as well as strict regulations applicable to small-scale traders (UNCTAD, 2019, p. 34). This is even though all three countries link through the SADC and, by being signatories to the SADC Protocol on GAD, have committed to addressing gender issues as well as implementing gender-responsive legislation and policies. Similarly, Malawi and Zambia also belong to COMESA and are guided by the COMESA Gender Mainstreaming manuals aimed at bolstering women's participation in trade (COMESA, 2010). Tanzania is also a member of the EAC and a stakeholder in the EAC Gender Equality and Development Bill.

According to the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) which includes a gender indicator and gives an index score ranging from 0–100, with zero being the worst possible score and 100 being the best, SSA scored 55.8 of 100 in 2017 (Ibrahim Index of African Governance [IIAG], 2018). Several countries showed notable improvements in addressing their gender issues while others kept declining (Figure 1). The IIAG gender index considers eight indicators measuring promotion of gender equality, workplace gender equality, women's labour force participation, women's political representation, gender parity in primary and lower secondary school, representation of women in the judiciary, laws on violence against women and women's political empowerment.

Figure 1: IIAG gender inequality status in SSA



Source: IIAG (2018)

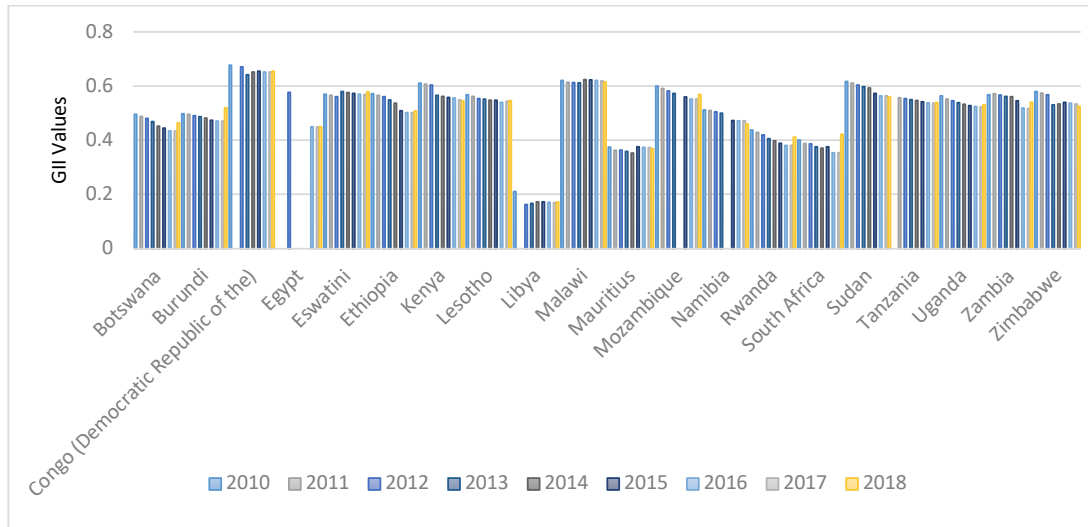
A detailed look at the specific gender measures in the three RECs within ESA revealed that the EAC performed better than its counterparts in terms of promotion of gender equality with a gender score of 62.4, followed by SADC and COMESA which scored 58.1 and 57.1, respectively. In terms of women’s labour force participation, the EAC scored high with 82.5, SADC scored 69.2 and COMESA scored 62.1. However, all three RECs seem to perform poorly in terms of the workplace gender equality measure with the EAC scoring 50, followed by SADC with 45.3 and COMESA scoring 40.8. It is important to note that the size of the individual RECs membership influences the IIAG indicator scores. This is especially applicable to the EAC scores, which are an aggregate of the individual scores of the region’s six member countries, while SADC and COMESA have much larger memberships consisting of 16 and 19 countries, respectively.

Nevertheless, over the last 10 years, the ESA region, taken individually, has generally made positive strides towards addressing gender inequality and improving the status of women, except for a few countries like Botswana, Malawi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Ibrahim Index of African Governance [IIAG], 2018). One of the major obstacles to gender equality in Botswana is the patriarchal attitude in the political class with only 10 per cent of members of parliament and 25 per cent of cabinet being women, leaving the country far from achieving 50 per cent of women in decision-making as stipulated in the SADC Protocol on GAD (World Bank, 2020). This is like Malawi, where entrenched patriarchal tendencies, manifested in factors such as violence against women, lack of affirmative measures and low representation of women in political structures, have all worked to limit women’s representation in political positions (UN Women, 2019). In the DRC the civil wars experienced from 1997–2003 are likely to have reversed any gender equality gains.

Data from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index (GII) shows that gender inequality levels in SSA were the highest in comparison to other global regions (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2019a). The GII ranges between zero and one, with zero being full equality between women and men and one indicating the highest level of inequality. GII measures gender inequalities based on three aspects of human development: reproductive health – measured by maternal mortality ratio and adolescent birth rates; empowerment – measured by the proportion of women in parliament, as well as both women and men over 25 years who have some secondary education; and economic status – measured by the rate of female and male labour force participation. In 2018 the SSA score on the GII stood at 0.573 compared to 0.276 in Europe and Central Asia, 0.310 in East Asia and the Pacific, 0.383 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 0.510 in South Asia and 0.531 in the Arab states (UNDP, 2019a, p. 319).

According to the 2019 UNDP Human Development Report most ESA countries have been experiencing a slight decline in gender inequality levels over the 2010–2018 period (Figure 2) (UNDP, 2019b). However, like the IIAG, a few countries such as the DRC and Malawi still maintained very high levels of gender inequality (over 0.6) in 2018 (UNDP, 2019b).

Figure 2: Gender inequality index in East and Southern Africa (2010–2018)



Source: UNDP (2019b)

The GII further suggests a positive correlation between low levels of gender inequality and the development of a country in terms of human development. Some ESA economies deemed to have high human development in 2018, like Mauritius, Botswana and Libya, registered low levels of gender inequality of 0.369, 0.464 and 0.172, respectively. This contrasts with the high levels of gender inequality registered by some of the economies deemed to have low human development like Malawi (0.615), the DRC (0.655), Lesotho (0.546) and Zimbabwe (0.525). However, the evidence is not conclusive as a country like Rwanda, which had a low level of gender inequality (0.412), has been placed in the low human development category, while Eswatini with a much higher level of gender inequality (0.579) is classified as having medium human development. Nevertheless, the slight inconsistency in the data reflects the dynamic nature of development and its varying indicators. The determinants of economic growth and development are multifaceted and complex. However, the World Bank's smart economic approach recognises women's economic empowerment and labour force participation, which is part of the GII measures, as being crucial in advancing other development outcomes.

Despite some of the gender mainstreaming efforts, most ESA countries still register relatively high gender inequality levels, which fall below the world average score on the GII (0.439). Most of the gender-specific challenges that women face when trying to engage in trade have persisted owing to the member countries' failure to commit to enforcing the gender mainstreaming policies endorsed by the RECs. Thus, some of the efforts required in the trade sector should focus on a shift towards gender-sensitive customs and trade policies.

4. Gender inequality in Customs in the ESA region

Although the WCO has offered various resources and training on gender equality, including the GEOAT, gender inequality persists in most customs administrations across the ESA. In terms of leadership, most customs administrations in the ESA are male dominated. Most revenue authorities in ESA are currently headed by male Commissioner General or directors, with limited exceptions including the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) and Uganda Revenue Authority (URA). A review of ESA customs administrations' top leadership further indicates that the executive management teams are male dominated. For instance, women occupy only 20 per cent of the executive leadership team for the South African Revenue Service (SARS), 25 per cent for the Rwanda Revenue Authority (RRA), 35.7 per cent for ZIMRA, 35.7 per cent for URA and 40 per cent for the Malawi Revenue Authority (MRA).¹ More women occupy the lower and nonpolicy making ranks compared to their male counterparts. For instance, according to ZIMRA's human resources statistics from 2012–2019, male employees have consistently accounted for over 55 per cent of the total employees.²

The male dominance exhibited in the composition of most revenue authorities can partly be attributed to the historical work practices and patriarchal attitudes. Tariff collection used to be handled manually with customs officials being required to physically collect taxes from taxpayers. These practices increased the chances of confrontation between officials and taxpayers, with the threat of coercion or violence (Mwondha et al., 2018, p. 6). Thus, these kinds of tasks were monopolised by men who were viewed as being capable of handling the related risks. The prestige and good income associated with employment in the sector further meant that such roles were mostly reserved for men, while women were left to fill the lower-paying occupations. However, the streamlining and automation of most processes with the introduction of e-filing and Single Window systems have promoted the submission of electronic data, and minimised face-to-face interactions between customs officials and taxpayers. Border inspection risks have further been mitigated with the promotion of postclearance audits through the introduction of risk assessment measures, declaration processing centres and Authorised Economic Operators (AEOs). These modern reforms have meant that customs officials are valued for their data analytics and other technical skills rather than any physical attributes. Thus, there is a need to improve on the number of women in the customs workforce as well as their representation in leadership positions.

Responses from customs officials within ZIMRA further indicate that work in some sections of the organisation is typically allocated along gender lines. This was to some extent based on the perception that women are less committed to their work owing to their social role as family caregivers. For instance, some female customs officials within ZIMRA cited situations where senior officers preferred working with men because they were less likely to take time off for family obligations and more likely to work odd hours, unlike their female counterparts.³ Some even claimed that men are more likely to get promoted because they had fewer family commitments than women. The truth of these statements cannot be empirically verified. However, they do highlight the persisting perception among female employees about gender inequality in the workplace. This points to the need for customs authorities to ensure that their gender mainstreaming efforts are accompanied by information sharing, training and awareness-raising to help change attitudes and beliefs about gender inequality within the organisational culture.

As noted earlier, the RECs within ESA as well as the WCO have already outlined measures to redress gender inequalities at the national and regional level. As such, members need to commit to the implementation of the various policies and programs. To this effect, an appreciation of the broader benefits likely to be gained from integrating gender equality into customs and trade operations would serve to motivate member countries to take action to promote gender equality.

5. Benefits of integrating gender into customs and trade operations

There is strong evidence to suggest that gender mainstreaming in customs and trade policy and practices has a positive effect on economic growth. The implementation of gender-responsive trade policy measures that aim to promote greater participation of women in trade would generally have a positive effect on the growth potential and productivity of the relevant ESA economies. The World Bank (2017, p. 3) further notes that the economic participation of women has the capacity to boost global competitiveness and growth, with economies that have a high female labour force participation managing to improve their international competitiveness mostly through attracting export-oriented manufacturing industries that typically favour the employment of women (ILO, 2014, p. 13).

Other studies that have analysed the impact of integrating gender issues into customs policies have noted similar positive gains. For instance, a study by Mwendha et al. (2018) focusing on female leadership within the URA found that women had a superior work ethic and were likely to focus on getting their work done, compared to men who were found to be more motivated by the prospect of extra earnings. This was further reflected in the length of employment with women within the URA serving an average period of 12.3 years compared to the men who averaged 11.6 years. The study also found that female employees received better performance appraisals than their male co-workers. Thus, promoting gender equality in the recruitment of customs officials within ESA will contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of member customs administrations.

Promoting gender equality and diversity in the workplace would not only increase the diversity of ideas and improve individual and organisational performance, but also have an impact on corruption. Several studies have found that greater female participation in leadership positions could have an impact in reducing bribery and corruption. A study by Bauhr et al. (2019) found that an increase in female representation has an effect in reducing corruption in the long term. It noted that the inclusion of female representatives in elected assemblies had a negative effect on the prevalence of both petty and grand forms of corruption. This was largely owing to such women representatives prioritising efforts aimed at improving service delivery to traditionally female-oriented sectors as well as the breakup of male-dominated clientelist networks. A World Bank report also notes that women are generally less tolerant of corruption and less likely to accept a bribe in their jobs when compared to men (Mason & King, 2001, p. 93). However, contrary arguments have been made that “women’s participation in corrupt activities may not be limited by gender-based propensities for probity, but rather by opportunities for corruption” (Hossain et al. 2010, p. 23). The proponents of this argument note that women in public office may not necessarily be less corrupt than men, but that corruption typically operates in specific networks to which women usually do not have access at the initial stages (Hossain et al. 2010, p. 24). These findings do suggest that the integration of women in leadership positions within Customs could further contribute to lowering levels of corruption and increase levels of integrity within the organisations, at least in the short term. However, increasing the representation of women in leadership should be supported with additional measures aimed at improving accountability, transparency and good governance.

6. Conclusion

Gender equality has long been recognised internationally as one of the key drivers of economic development. Efforts to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are in line with the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). Since the 1970s there have been various theoretical assumptions and perspectives on gender and development, seeking to explain how development affects women and how women's issues are relevant to development. This has recently culminated in the World Bank's exclusive focus on gender equality and women's empowerment as smart economics, noting that investing in women and girls has the potential to improve a country's economic efficiency and help it achieve other development outcomes.

The positive impact of gender-responsive trade policies and measures in promoting both women's economic empowerment and inclusive development in the ESA region has further been highlighted in various agreements and strategies endorsed by the RECs. The EAC, COMESA and SADC member states have all passed regional agreements that push for the incorporation of gender perspectives into member countries' customs and trade policies. Nevertheless, the gender mainstreaming efforts made at the regional level have failed to materialise at the national level, with many member countries still registering high levels of gender inequality compared to other regions. This is largely attributed to the fact that individual member states have failed to implement the regional gender guidelines effectively. As a result, many women in ESA engaged in ICBT continue to be plagued by multiple challenges that limit their capacity to diversify their products and expand their enterprises. In the same context gender parity is yet to be achieved within the region's customs and revenue authorities, as many remain largely male dominated at the executive management level.

The failure to effectively promote gender equality in trade and customs' policies has limited the ESA member countries' ability to seize the associated economic gains. The implementation of gender-responsive trade measures would not only increase wages for women but also has the potential to boost such economies' global competitiveness especially through attracting foreign export-oriented firms which tend to favour female employees. Moreover, integrating women into leadership positions in customs administrations has the potential to not only improve the organisational performance but also reduce the risk of bribery and corruption. Thus, the ESA member countries need to take steps to implement and enforce the gender measures they have committed to in their regional agreements.

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Notes

- 1 Review of websites of the revenue authorities within the ESA member countries, April 2019.
- 2 Interview with a ZIMRA Human Resource official, Harare, March–April 2019.
- 3 Interviews with several female customs officials in the ZIMRA, Harare, March–April 2019.

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